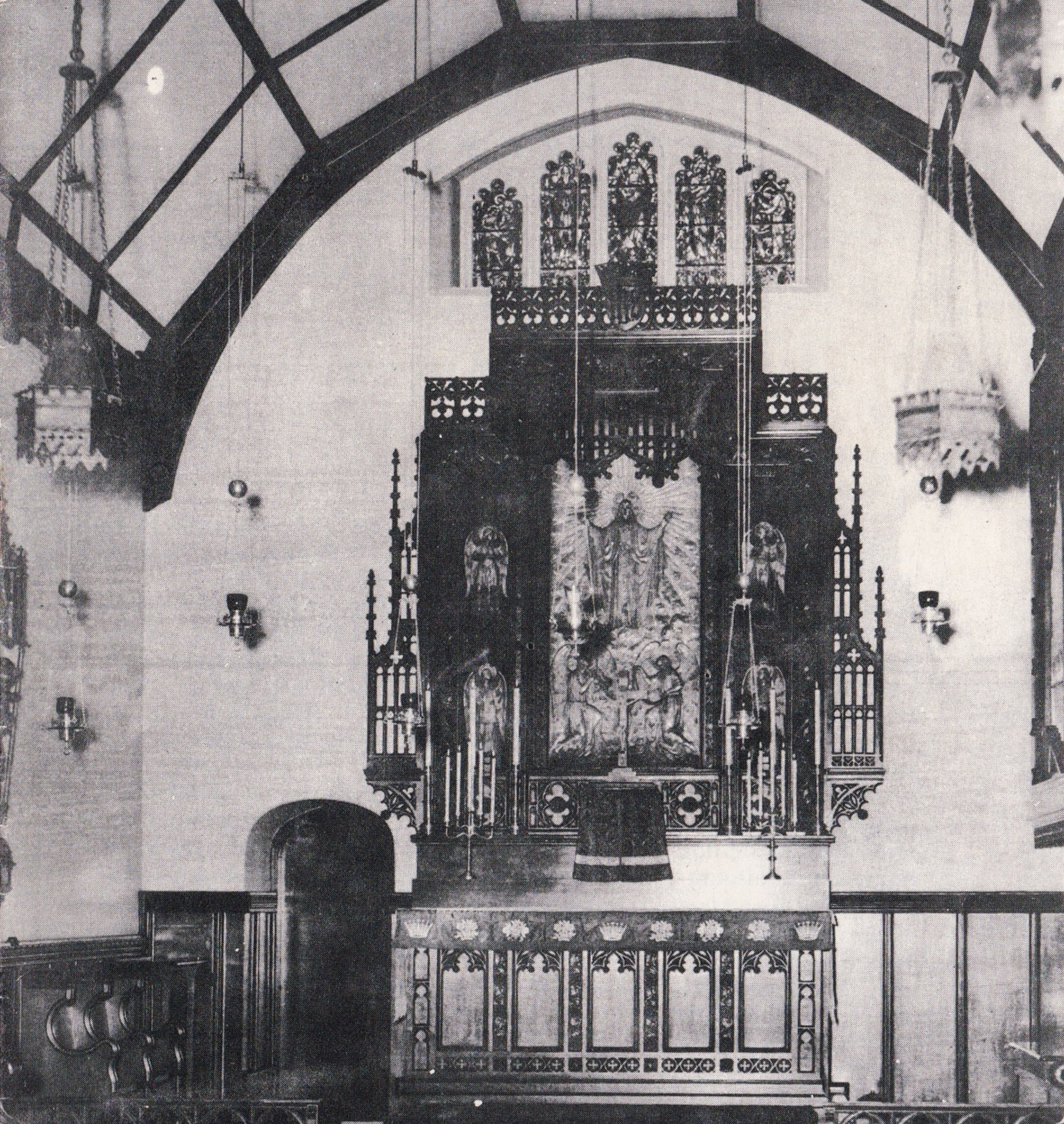


St. Margaret's Convent

HISTORY OF THE CHAPEL

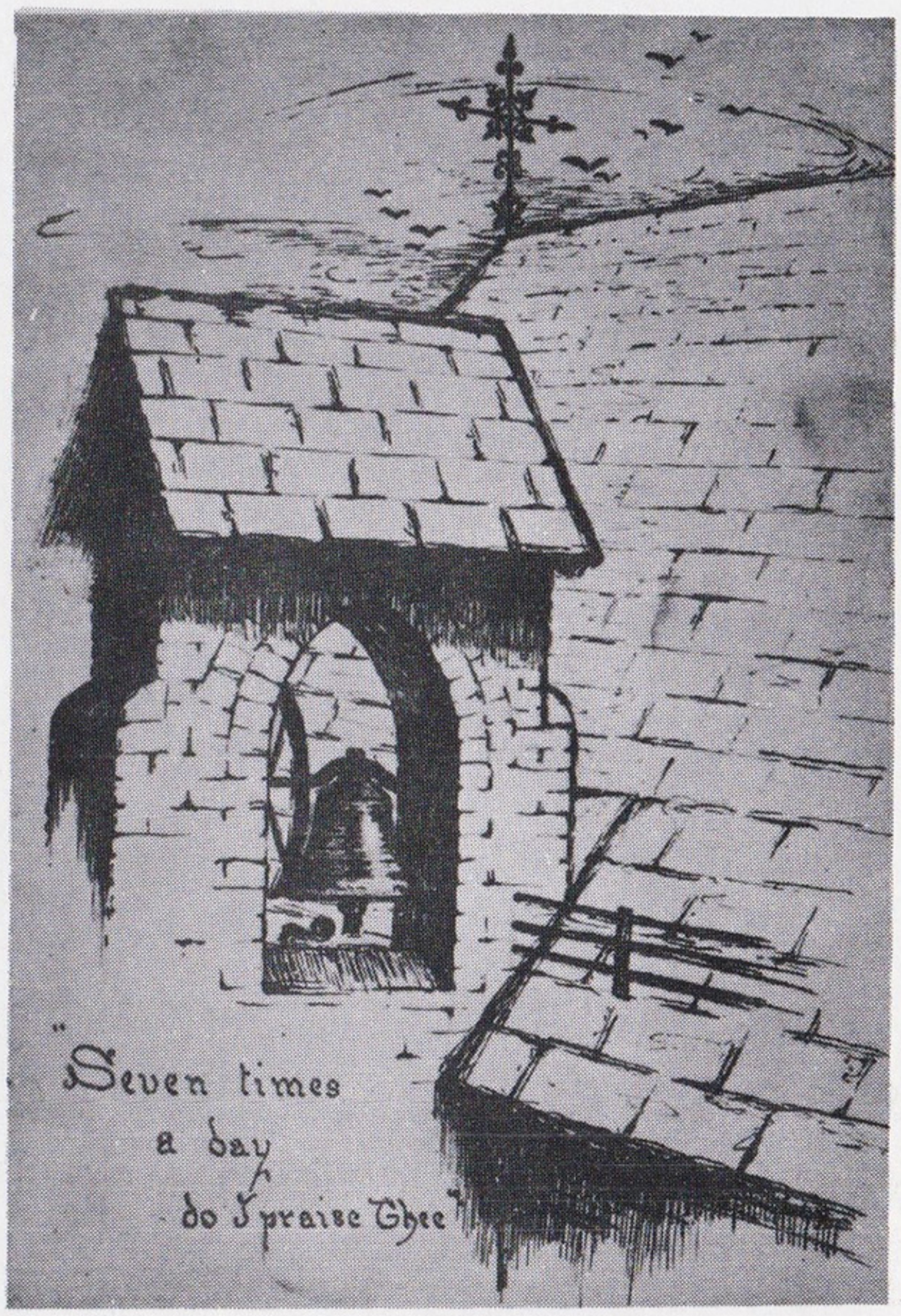
by Gabrielle A.R. Griswold, an Associate, S.S.M.

In 1873 three sisters of the Society of St. Margaret came from England in the full knowledge that they were going to remain in America. They were Mother Louisa Mary, Sister Teresa and Sister Jessie. By 1880, seven short years later – but in reality seven long years of hard work, devotion, and loving care of all with whom they came in contact – there had been several professions, the novitiate numbered twenty, and there were already a goodly number of associates. An early sister wrote, "The three original sisters have been multiplied tenfold . . . . . God has been good to us . . . . . the Hand that brought us over the Atlantic has been and is still at the helm."

In those early years the sisters moved around quite a bit, as they had no permanent home. But they soon realized that one must be found. So after due deliberation and prayer they decided to purchase three adjoining houses on Louisburg Square. That was in November 1881, and on December 4, the first Mass was celebrated in a temporary chapel in the corner house where Louisburg Square and Pinckney Street meet, now 17 Louisburg Square.

But a permanent chapel was the real hope and desire of the sisters. So in 1882, an English architect, Henry Vaughan, came to the United States for the specific purpose of designing and supervising its building. He designed every detail of the chapel-to-be, even to sketching the wood-carvings that would eventually be made.

Mr. Vaughan examined the refectory, which had now been built on the land immediately behind the Louisburg houses, and found it an excellent foundation for the new chapel. So construction began at once. Finally on February 1, 1883, the Feast of the Purification "a goodly company assembled for the benediction of the new chapel". A procession formed, "the clergy passed in to the choir with holy water and incense, while the others remained without, chanting the Miserere. The sisters and novices then entered the choir and took their places in the stalls for the service of Benediction, after which the first Vespers of the feast were sung." And a sister said happily, "Our beautiful chapel is a worthy offering to God, and a great comfort to the sisters." Beautiful it was, and even more beautiful it was to become. It was not until 1921, however, that it was finished as you see it today.



When you visit the chapel and go down the four steps that lead into the ante-chapel, look up quickly to the right just beyond the window, and you'll see two long white cords. They are the pulls that ring the chapel bell for the Divine Office. You'll hear it if you stay for a service, as we hope you will. It is housed in a delightful little belfry just outside the south wall of the anti-chapel. (See our sketch of it.) This English bell, with its pure, sweet tone was heard for the first time in the call to Vespers on the Feast of the Purification in 1924. It is sixteen inches in diameter and weighs 132 pounds; so it really takes a good tug to ring it. On the wall just behind the pulls is a tablet that tells you the bell was given by associates to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the American house.

Let us quote what a sister wrote in St. Margaret's Quarterly of May 1924: the bell is "a great joy to us all and an inspiration as well, helping us to realize that the voice of God is calling us to prayer. Three times a day the Angelus bids us express our faith in the Incarnation; the bell rings out for the Consecration at Mass, and seven times a day we are called to prayer and praise in the daily Office. . . . We may think of the bell also as a symbol of what the convent aims to be: a witness for God and His service to the careless world around. May the voice of our bell always remind us that as it continually rings out to the glory of God, so our lives should express His praise and call other souls to His service."

Now look up to the left wall, where you'll see a large three-paneled stained glass window, dedicated by Bishop Knox Sherrill in 1937 "to the glory of God and in loving memory of Mother Susanna Margaret, Superior (1912-1936)."

Don't let these dates worry you. They pop up now and then, and are given only for the sake of accurate recording. We don't plan to take you through the chapel in any chronological fashion, but rather as you'll see it when you enter and go to take your place behind the rood-screen. Normally lay persons sit behind the rood-screen and only the sisters sit in the choir; although on days when there are lay retreats and the sisters are not in chapel, then lay persons may sit in the choir. If you look up at the rood-screen you'll see it's a beautiful one, depicting the crucifixion with Mary the mother of Jesus, and St. John, the beloved disciple, at the foot of the Cross.

Now look up again at Mother Susanna's window. It shines best with bright sunlight on it to bring out its rich blues and reds. In stained glass it portrays that moment of the Crucifixion related in St. John's Gospel (Ch. 19:26,27) "when Jesus, therefore, saw his mother and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, 'Woman, behold thy son.' Then saith he to the disciple, 'Behold thy Mother.' And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home."

In the small panel directly behind the Crucifix, St. Margaret kneels in prayer, and a riband bears the legend "St. Margaret, Pray for us." The two bottom panels, left and right, bear respectively the names, "Haiti" and "Canada," two countries where missionary houses were established during Mother Susanna's tenure as Superior.

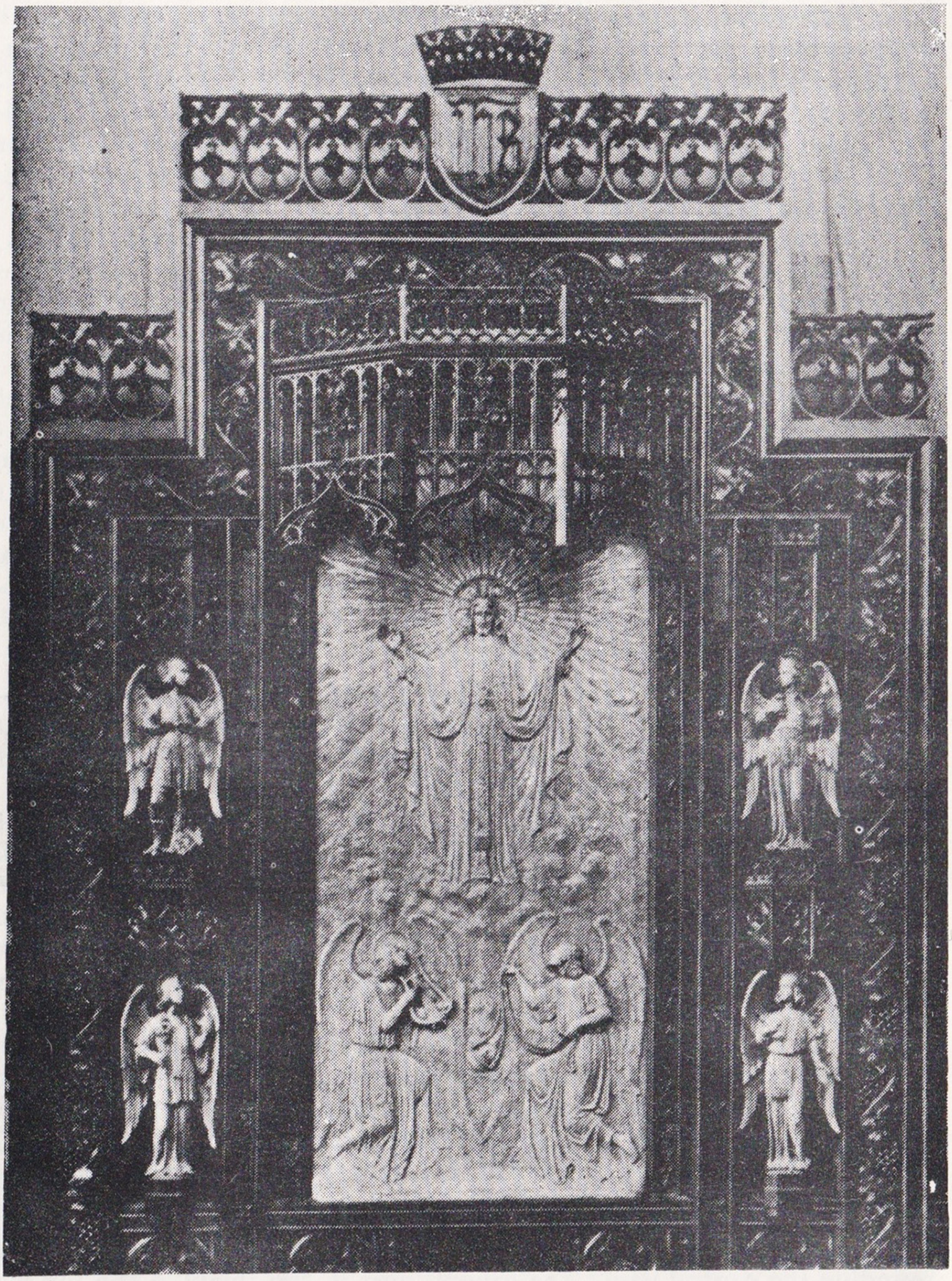
As your eye travels along the choir, it will focus on the Altar and the beautiful central panel of the reredos, a delicately carved representation of "Our Lord in Glory." This panel, the Crucifix, and the four archangels are in pale limewood, in planned contrast to the dark oak of the rest of the chapel. If you look more closely you will see our Lord with arms uplifted in blessing, and at His feet two adoring angels. One angel with a harp brings music, and represents the song and praise offered here each day to God. The other angel offers incense which subtly "veils and yet reveals" a multitude of the adoring host of heaven.

If you'd like to know which archangel is which, start at the bottom left. This is the Angel Gabriel, messenger of the Lord, who, because he announced to Mary that she was to be the Mother of Jesus, is called the "Angel of the Annunciation." He carries a lily in his hand. Just above is Michael with sword in hand. Traditionally regarded as the guardian of the Church and the defender of the faithful; he is supposed to weigh the souls of men at the Last Day. On the lower right you'll see Uriel, angel of learning and interpreter of prophecy. His name means "God is my light" and he carries a book. And upper right is Raphael, "Healer of God" and guardian angel of all humanity. He bears the cup of healing, and is identified with the angel at the Pool of Bethesda.

Now look at the rest of the reredos and the Altar. There are Tudor roses decorating the uprights between the panels of the Altar – each with a different center – and a luxuriant grapevine that twines around the entire reredos. The vine is the vine of which Jesus spoke (John: Ch. 15:1,5), "I am the true vine . . . . I am the vine, ye are the branches." The grapes symbolize the wine in the Holy Eucharist.

Everywhere you look, whether it be to the dark oak fretwork surrounding the central panel, the canopy over it, the shield at the top with letters IHS, or even the high border of the sister's stalls, everywhere there is a wealth of delicate and perfect hand-carving, which really should be seen closely and examined carefully for true appreciation of its beauty. We know that an Italian wood-carver, Mr. E. Pellegrini, carved the central panel of Christ in Glory, but we are not sure who did the other carvings.

We are told that the Crucifix and the candlesticks for the Altar were imported from England. The crucifix must truly be one of the finest ever carved. It reveals a slim, delicate Christ with a sensitive and hauntingly beautiful face.



To the left of the Altar is a statue of the Virgin and Child in full relief. The Christ Child holds in His infant hands a long shaft, one end of which is a sharply pointed spear, indicative of His fight against evil; and the other end is a Cross, symbolic of His sacrifice to come.

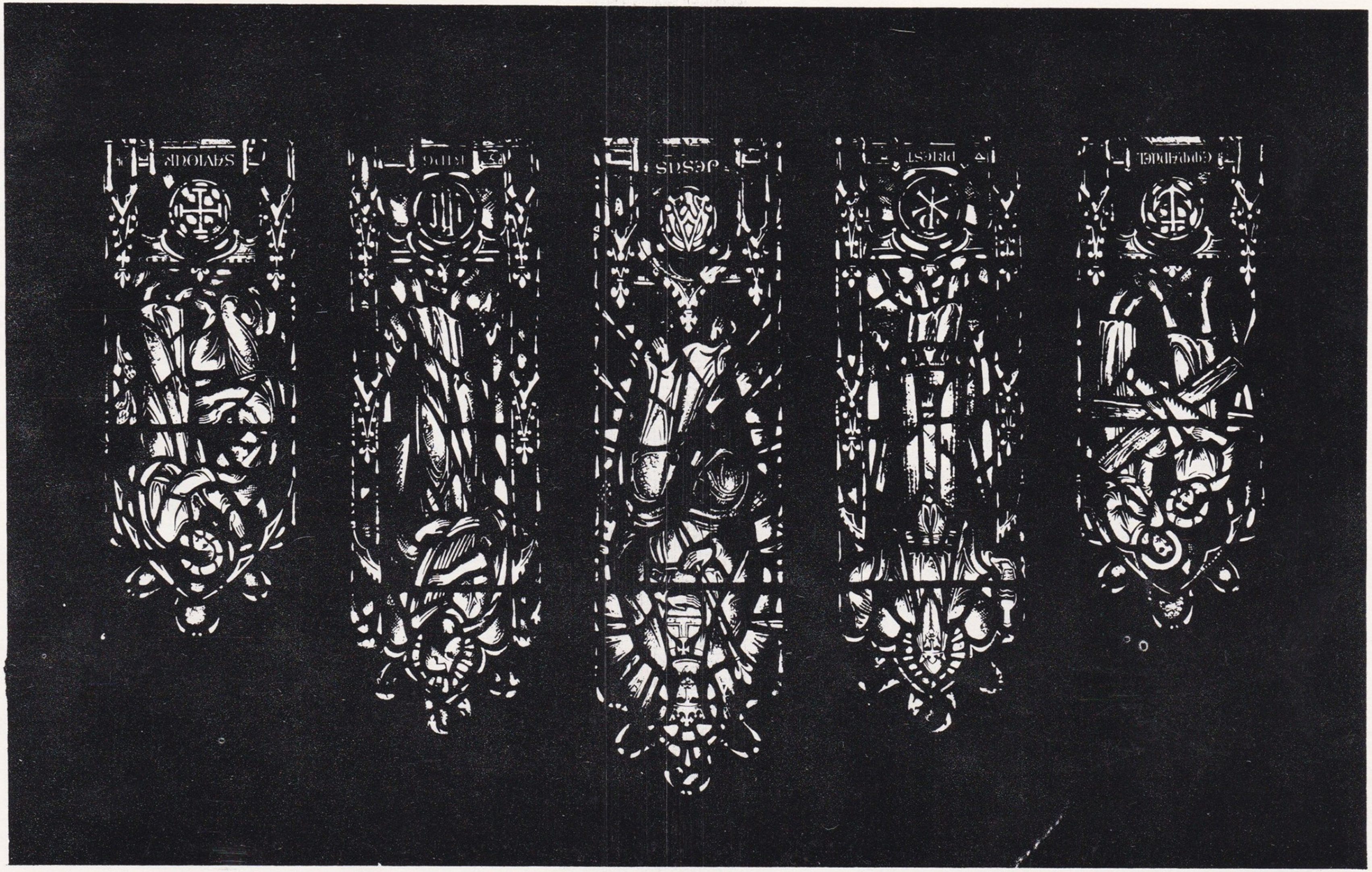
To the right of the Altar is a mellow-toned pipe organ that adds its rich voice to God's praise. It is a two-manual organ with tracker action, built by Cole and Woodbury (a Boston firm) in 1894, and adapted especially to accompany women's voices. It has for these many years been a delightful addition to the chapel services.

Now look up once more, high over the Altar, and see the five lancet stained-glass windows which are a unique conception of both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus, and at the same time a portrayal of the life and goals of the Society of St. Margaret. The central figure, Christ reigning in Glory with orb and sceptre, reminds us that "everything is for God alone, to His greater glory, and more perfect love." This as you know, is the professed goal of the lives of the sisters. Melchizedec on the left, "Priest forever," anticipates Christ's priestly office and His presence in the Holy Eucharist — the daily spiritual food of the sisters. Next, the boy Jesus, working in the carpenter's shop, suggests the every-day work which the Society does in complete humility and selflessness, and also bears witness to the sisters' dedication to the Holy Name of Jesus. On the other side is David with his lyre, the King from whose family came Christ's humanity; and this tells us of the songs of praise raised to God in the chapel services. And finally, there is the window that shows Jesus Savior, healing a blind man; and this may be interpreted as representative of the nursing care for which the Society was founded and which to this day it continues in the care and healing of the sick body, mind or spirit. What a wonderful two-fold conception this window was — and is!

Perhaps now you will also have noticed the seven sanctuary lamps suspended in front of the Altar. The white lamp in the center, burning directly before the Tabernacle, reveals the presence of the reserved Sacrament and symbolizes the constant watchfulness and adoration of the Church. Together with the six red lights it recalls the Seven Churches of the Apocalypse (Rev: Chs. 1—3) and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Godliness and Holy Fear.

Although the chapel is a living, holy monument of daily prayer and devotion, it is also a memorial. For on the panels behind the sisters' stalls are carved the names of all departed members of the Society. Beginning with the first panel on the left or Gospel side, the inscription reads "To the Glory of God and in loving memory of our Sisters. Jesu, Mercy. Eternal rest grant unto them, Lord, and light perpetual shine upon them. May they rest in peace." On the wall at the right or Epistle side, the first panel reads, "Per Angusta — Ad Augusta. Mother Louisa Mary, First Superior, 1873-1903. Entered into rest January 7, 1909."

Dr. John Mason Neale, the founder of the Society of St. Margaret, had "Per Angusta — Ad Augusta" as his personal motto even before he gave it to the Society, and had it inscribed over the mantelpiece of his study at Sackville College, East Grinstead. Various translations have been made: "Through the steeps to the stars," "Through tribulation to holiness," "By anguish to victory," "By sacrifice to sanctity." It was the Reverend William Cheney, a priest Associate, who many years ago wrote what we consider an excellent commentary on the motto. We quote from him liberally.


SAVIOUR
IHC
JESUS
PRIEST
EMMANUEL

"The best explanation of this motto is found in the words of our Lord, *Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life.* Through strait things to great things. Through earthly hardship to heavenly honor. Through narrow paths to reach eternal glory. And this is clearly seen when our Lord says, *Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.* Think of Blessed Mary! Think, most of all, of our dear Lord Himself! This is the motto of Mary and the motto of Jesus.

"The Latin *angusta* means things restricted, poor and difficult. But *augusta* means, on the other hand, things majestic, superabundant and unbounded. The superb new name given to the Caesar who ruled the earth when Christ was born was just this word, *Augustus.* During that era Eternal Love was born on earth in great humility, and now His is the Greatness and the Power and the Glory and the Majesty.

"We see how this is a good motto for the religious life, with its threefold vow, which curtails and narrows personal possessions, natural inclinations and freedom of choice, but leads to a life of daily union with the highest and most sacred interests and transactions."

In an entirely different vein, but interesting enough to mention, is the fact that one of the sisters of St. Margaret happened to see in the Tower of London the words which a prisoner in the White Tower carved on the wall of his cell: "Par passage penible, passons a part plaisant." It rang a bell, so to speak, for, though far from expressing the depth of meaning of the Society's motto, it still had enough of the same thought behind it to attract attention. There was also a flash-back of historical interest, for the words were most likely carved there at the time when England was Norman and the Plantagents were the kings of England.

And now, you will remember that we have several times mentioned the Divine Office."Seven times a day do I praise Thee" the Psalm says. Each part of the Divine Office is a service made up of selections from the Psalms, a hymn, and prayers — an offering of praise and thanksgiving. These services, as said by the sisters, are Matins and Lauds at 7 a.m., Terce at 9 a.m., Sext at noon, Nones at 3 p.m., Vespers at 6 p.m. and Compline at 9 p.m. These have for centuries been the traditional services of the Church and of those who have given themselves to a professed life. It has been said that, at the hour of Matins, Christ was seized while at prayer in the garden of Gethsemane; at the hour of Lauds He was brought before Pilate; at Terce He was condemned, reviled and led forth to carry His Cross; at Sext He was crucified; at Nones He rendered up His spirit to the Father; at Vespers He was taken down from the Cross; and at Compline He was laid in the grave. These hours are hours when the community comes together in corporate worship.

In addition each sister has an hour and a half of private prayers each day and a day of retreat once every month. The chapel is open to sisters (and lay persons too) for prayers and meditation from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.. There are community retreats, varying from one day to one week, at least three times a year — in spring and autumn, and at the New Year.

INRI

There are retreat opportunities for associates and lay persons also; priest-conducted one-day retreats in Advent and Lent; and during the summer one or two three-day retreats at the summer convent in Duxbury. Besides, one can almost any time arrange to make a private retreat or have a quiet day.

The sisters' dedication to the Blessed Sacrament is often expressed by a special Holy Hour. You will remember the words of Jesus to the sleeping apostles in the garden of Gethsemane: "Could ye not watch with me one hour?" There are indeed hours of watching and prayer and adoration at the convent, sometimes on a day of Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, sometimes by a watch on the first Friday of the month, sometimes by the Office of the Blessed Sacrament with a sung memorial after Vespers.

Since the Society of St. Margaret has a two-fold dedication, devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to the Holy Name of Jesus, the Holy Eucharist is celebrated and the litany of the Holy Name recited every day.

In addition to the time they devote to worship, the sisters give their lives to selfless service in nursing and healing the sick and the aged, in teaching the Word of God, in helping the poor and the disinherited, and in performing communal duties within the community itself.

Now that you are here with us, we hope you will stay a while — and then come back again and again. You will be welcome. We love our beautiful House of God and are happy to have you with us, to join in prayer to God the Father — the Creator, God the Son — the Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit — the Light and Guide of our Souls; One God, blessed be His name forever!

THE HOUSE OF MY PILGRIMAGE
History of the American House of the
SOCIETY OF ST. MARGARET

1873 – 1973

by Sister Catherine Louise, S.S.M.

For Sale $2.00 from Book Secretary

St. Margaret's Convent
17 Louisburg Square
Boston, Mass. 02108

Daily Chapel Services

Eucharist 7:30 A.M.
except Wednesday 12 noon

Divine Office:

7:00 A.M. Matins & Lauds
9:00 Terce
12 noon Sext
3 P.M. None
6:00 Vespers
(Followed by Benediction
on Thursdays)
9:00 Compline

The chapel is available from
6:30 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. to
anyone needing quiet for
meditation and prayer.